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The Last Luminary

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This text is a brief attempt to study the short history of the fundamental belief to the life of Hujjat al-Haqq (The Rightful Proof of Allah), and sheds light on the minor and major occultation.

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Preface

The magnificent and auspicious celebration of the fifteenth of Sha'ban can be observed everywhere. Every place has been decorated.

In every place joyful and cheerful gatherings can be seen.

The enthusiasm and happiness of the Shi'ites on this auspicious day is apparent everywhere.

Indeed, what day is revered like this day by people with such elation and glory?

The fifteenth of Sha'ban is the day in which the Shi'ites saw the fulfilment of the glad tidings of the divine messengers.

It is the day in which the good news of Islam, the Qur'an and the traditions (*ahadith*) of the infallible Imams will take place.

It is on his birthday that he will bring the east and west of the world to justice, and by his powerful hand annihilate demons (*'ifrit*), infidelity and irreligiosity.

On this day, the authority of the Last Luminous Jewel of Allah will be established on the face of the earth. He it is who will decide the end of the long struggle between truth and falsehood. His appearance will mean a victory for truth and the annihilation of falsehood.

He is the same person who, by the will of Allah, will overpower fragile doctrines, and will pursue and accomplish the objectives of the Last Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.).¹

He will remove ignorance and class-discrimination from the world and will establish equality instead; he will exploit the earth's resources, distribute them among the poor and make them sufficient.

The outburst of enthusiasm and happiness will at that time cause tears to flow down the cheeks of enthusiasts, and the lustrous and mournful eyes of the awaiting people will be filled with light.

Mahdism is the most genuine and fundamental Islamic belief, which even a person with a limited knowledge of Islam will surely accept.

Since it is obligatory for every Muslim to know the "Leader of the Age" – Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi (a.s.)², it has been endeavoured here – though in brief – to study the short history of this fundamental belief and present a brief introduction to the life of Hujjat al-Haqq (The Rightful Proof [of Allah]). We hope this meagre "collection", as a humble gift, will be accepted by the Solomon of the Age"

15th Sha'ban, 1396

1. (s.a.w.): is the abbreviation of the Arabic phrase *salla 'llahu 'alayhi wa alih* (may Allah's peace and blessing be upon him and his progeny).

2. (a.s.): is the abbreviation of the Arabic phrase *'alay-hi/ha /himu's-salam* (may peace be upon him/ her/ them)

The Good News

There is no doubt that the Holy Qur'an is the book of Allah, and that all the Muslims of the world accept and obey its teachings and instructions. When one opens this Book (Qur'an) and casts a glance at its verses, one will come to what seems to be a clear vista of the extraordinary, sensational and exciting future and end of the universe.

The Holy Qur'an says that the ultimate mission of the Holy Prophet of Islam is to make this holy religion prevail over all other religions of the world; and one day this holy aspiration will finally be fulfilled, as the Holy Qur'an says:

He it is who has sent His messenger (Muhammad) with the guidance and the Religion of Truth, that He may cause it to prevail over all religions, however much the idolaters may be averse.
(9:33)

The divine book of the last Messenger of Allah gives the glad tidings that rule over the earth shall finally belong to the righteous and virtuous servants of Allah:

The earth is Allah's. He gives it for an inheritance to who He will. And lo! the sequel is for those who keep their duty (unto Him). (7:128)

The earth, which will be full of corruption, destruction and ignorance like a lifeless body, will be revived with the glowing light of justice, as referred to in the Holy Qur'an.

We also read in the Holy Qur'an:

Allah has promised such of you as believe and do good works that

He will surely make them succeed (the present rulers) in the earth even

as he caused those who were before them to succeed (others) and that

He will surely establish for them religion which he has approved for them,

and will give them in exchange safety after their fear. They serve Me. They

ascribe no thing as partner unto Me. (24:55)

The Almighty Allah also says:

Fain would they put out the light of Allah with their mouths, but

Allah will perfect His light however much the disbelievers are averse. (61-8)

These are some short examples of the divine glad tidings mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. By studying these matters and tens of other similar matters, it shall be perceived that the Islamic message will reach its complete fulfilment when these holy aspirations and desires have taken place. All fabricated and superstitious objectives will disappear and then only Islam, the unique and true religion, will be the faith of the people in the east and west of the world.

Injustice, oppression and inequality shall vanish and instead justice and equality which is the law of the creation of the world will be established everywhere. The sovereignty of the divine caliphs (*khulafa'*) will be established in all the corners of the world. The light of the guidance of Allah will shine and the earth belong to the virtuous ones.

Yes, the Holy Qur'an gives the good news that a day will come when all Muslims of the world shall wait enthusiastically for such a time.

* * *

Next to the Holy Qur'an, the sayings of the Holy Prophet and the Honourable Imams are the most important and worthiest treasure of Islamic learning. For every Muslim, it is obligatory and essential to follow and obey the sayings of the Holy Prophet and the Holy Imams since obeying their commands is particularly and clearly mentioned in the Book of Allah.

In the sea of jewels of Islamic traditions, glad tidings on the Government of Justice can be seen. Moreover, special mention has been made regarding the "Divine Revolution" and the divine leader who will fulfil this holy aspiration.

The Holy Prophet of Islam said:

"Even when the entire duration of the world's existence has already been exhausted, and one solitary day is left to embrace the eve of Doomsday, Allah will expand that day and make it swell to such a length of time as to accommodate the ultimate reign of a person out of my holy progeny who will be called by my name and my agnomen ('Abu 'l-Qasim). He will then make the earth abound with peace and justice as it will have been fraught with injustice and tyranny before him."

The context of this precious tradition reveals a definite good news more than anything else. and informs the people of the Government of Justice, Achievement and Divine Promises as mentioned in most of the Shi'ite and Sunnite sources.

In another tradition, the Holy Prophet told Amir al-mu'minin 'Ali (a.s.), saying:

"There will be twelve Guides (*aimmah*) after me, the first of whom is you, O 'Ali, and the last one will be the , Support , (*al-Qa'im*), who with Almighty Allah's grace, will gain victory over the whole of the east and west of the world."

The Purified Imams reminded people in several traditions of the significance of the Divine Promise and Government of the Twelfth Imam, and told them that waiting for the Great Saviour is the most valuable deed, and that his followers and devotees are the best and the beloved people.

It will suffice here to quote, as an example, a few of these traditions:

1) When Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba (a.s.) held the seat of the caliphate, he fought the hypocritical Mu'awiyah, who, with the assistance of his cunning minister, gradually deceived the companions of Imam Hasan (a.s.), who thus deserted and left the Imam alone. Hence, he was compelled to make a peace treaty with Mu'awiyah in which he (Mu'awiyah) was obliged to comply with some duties and to refrain from appointing a successor and fighting.

On some occasions, the Imam took the opportunity to point out to the people Mu'awiyah's errors and unjust acts. Meanwhile, some of ignorant people started criticizing the Imam as to why he had accepted the peace treaty Imam Hasan (a.s.) clarified for the people the meaning of the Imam and the leader, and the necessity of obeying every command of the Imam without asking why and wherefore. Then he explained to them about the Government of the Twelfth Imam, saying:

"Don't you know that every one of us (Imams) has the responsibility of taking allegiance from the oppressors of his time, except the 'Support' (*al-Qa'im*) behind whom the Spirit of Allah (Jesus) will pray, and Almighty Allah will keep secret his birth from some people and will conceal his person from their sights. When he appears he will not be responsible for taking allegiance from anyone. He is the ninth descendant of my brother Husayn, the son of the captive princess. Almighty Allah will prolong his age during his occultation, and by His Perfect Power, he will appear as a young man of less than forty years so that all people will know that Allah truly has power over all things."

2. Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) in reply to a question from one of his followers about his successors, said:

"The Imam succeeding me is my son Musa, and the Awaited Imam is Muhammad ibn Hasan ibn 'Ali ibn Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn Musa."

The same Imam is quoted as having said repeatedly that:

"Every group of people is waiting for a government, and we are waiting for our Government to be established at the End of Time."

3) The Seventh Holy Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) in a reply to one of his companions who asked him whether he was "*al-Qa'im bi'l-Haqq*" (he who is supported by the Truth), said:

"I am *al-Qa'im bi'l-Haqq*, but that '*al-Qa'im*' who will remove Allah's enemies from the earth and will fill it with justice and equity is my fifth descendant. Since he will fear for his own life, he will be in occultation for a long time during which a group of people will apostate, but there will also be a group who will be firm in their belief."

He added:

"Blessed are our followers (the Shi'ites) who, during the time of the occultation (*ghaybah*) of the Imam of the Age, identify themselves with our Authority (*wilayah*) and keep away from our enemies. They belong to us and we belong to them. They have accepted our leadership and we are pleased with their adherence. Therefore, blessed are they. I swear to Allah that they will be with us in our rank in Paradise."

4) Finally, the Eleventh Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) said:

"I see that after me differences will appear among you concerning the Imam after me. Whoever accepts the Imams after the Prophet of Allah but denies my son is like a person who accepts all the prophets but denies the prophethood of Muhammad (s.a.w.), the Prophet of Allah. And whoever denies (Muhammad) the Prophet of Allah is like one who has denied all the prophets of Allah, for to obey the last of us is like obeying the first and to deny the last of us is like denying the first. But beware! Verily, for my son there will be an occultation during which all people will fall into doubt except those whom Allah protects."

The available traditions from the Holy Prophet and the infallible Imams are so many in number as to make us well-informed on this important principle of faith. One can say that the most important, and the highest recorded number, of traditions is on the subject of Imamology (*Imamate*) in the Shi'ite books of traditions.

The subject of the leadership of the Twelfth Imam, his Government, and other related matters, comes next to the subject of the successorship of Imam 'Ali, Amir al-mu'minin (a.s). There are hundreds of these traditions recorded both in the Shi'ite and Sunnite books. A large number of religious scholars from all Islamic sects have independently compiled books on this subject. Their number runs to tens of volumes.

* * *

The years of Imams', Islamic leadership passed one after another along with tyranny of the rulers contemporary with them, till the leadership of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) came. This Holy Imam lived in a difficult circumstances, appearing less frequently in the public gatherings. His beloved son who is the last Divine Proof, was hidden from the sight of strangers till the year 260 A. H., when the rays of his being set while the eyes of all people were fixed at the door of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.).

The Birth

At dawn, on the 15th Sha'ban 255 A.H., the rays of the illuminating world shone with a powerful shaft of light into a human form which became the source of existence for the universe.

Yes, finally the Divine Promise was fulfilled and Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) was born in spite of the efforts of those who denied him.

It is one of history's miracles that the Umayyids 'Abbasides and other opponents of this Holy Imam attempted to extinguish this divine light but met with complete failure.

The cruel and tyrannical caliphs of the Bani 'Abbas had heard that the Twelfth Imam of the Shi'ites would establish a just Government and would rule over the east and west of the world, and would destroy the foundations of injustice. Therefore, to counter this event, they tortured and shed the blood of the Shi'ites as much as they could. The conditions of the martyred Shi'ites can be referred in the books on this subject.

In the year 235 A. H., Mutawakkil, the 'Abbasid caliph, ordered the Tenth Imam Muhammad al-Hadi (a.s.) and his family to be shifted from Medina to Samarra', his seat of government, so that he could keep a close watch on the Imam of the Shi'ites.

Similarly, Mu'tamid, the 'Abbasid caliph, the Pharaoh of the time, was afraid of the son of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.). He formed a group of detectives and midwives who had the mission of frequently searching through the houses of the 'Alawiyyin, and especially the house of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.), so that if a newly-born child were found, he could be killed immediately.

The search to find and kill Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) was intensified when Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) left this world for the eternal one. This is because everyone knew that on that day the command of Divine Leadership (Imamate) was to be entrusted to the Twelfth Imam, and the universe would come under his authority.

Shaykh Saduq, the eminent scholar of the Shi'ite world, writes in *Kamalu 'd-din*:

"When the holy body of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) was buried and the people went away, the caliph and his comrades started their efforts to search for his growing son and inspected the houses carefully."

Shaykh Mufid, a distinguished Shi'ite scholar, also wrote in *Irshad*:

"When Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) passed away, the caliph of that time, pursued his son because the Shi'ite Imamiyyah's belief was famous and was spread about that the Shi'ites were awaiting His Eminence."

Mu'tadid one of the tyrant 'Abbasid caliphs who ruled from 279 to 289 A H., decided all at once to destroy the entire family of al, Askari when he heard that more than twenty years had passed since the birth of the son of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s) and that he was still living in spite of the attempts of the preceding caliph to kill him.

One of Mu'tadid's officers said:

"Mu'tadid has ordered me and two other persons, each of us to mount a horse and to proceed to Samarra' in full speed without even stopping for prayer. He gave us the address of (Imam) al- Askari and instructed us to enter his house without his permission and to bring him the head of whoever we find there."

As a matter of fact, they were unaware that the same power which had protected the Imam from the former caliphs would give him protection from his evil, because:

Allah disdains (nothing) save that He shall perfect His light, however much the disbelievers are averse. (Qur'an, 9:32)

Indeed what an immature thought and foolish act it was! If the Divine Will bears on some matter, can a person revolt against it and combat it? Is it possible that definite Divine Promises may not be compiled with? Or is it possible that the reins of oppressive imposters who fight against the Divine decree will not cut?

Is it not more amazing that Peerless, Almighty Allah has shown His power many times before, so that after that all men should know that if He wishes to give His chosen servant government and sovereignty and to destroy in fidelity and irreligiousness through him, then there is no one who can disrupt His rule?

Fortunately, this sensational story is mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. Pharaoh, the great emperor of Egypt, who had great power and pride, claimed the divinity for himself. He determined to kill all the youths and boy children of Bani Isra'il as a result of what he had heard about a son being born who would destroy his empire and divinity.

He shed the blood of innocents, and banished many persons to unknown regions; but see how Almighty Allah restored His Prophet and how the Divine Will worked to protect the life of Musa (Moses – a.s.) and destroy Pharaoh:

And We revealed to the mother of Musa, saying, "Give him suck; and if you fear for him, launch him on the river. and fear not, nor grieve; for We will return him to you and make him one of the Messengers." And took him up Pharaoh's people, that he might be to them an enemy and a (cause of their) grief (for) verily Pharaoh and Haman and their hosts were sinners. . . So We did restore him to his mother that her age might be refreshed and that she might not grieve, and that she might know that the promise of Allah is (always) true, but most of them know not.

(28:7- 13)

Yes, Allah will protect His Proof (*Hujjah*) and will fulfil His promises and glad tidings because His

decision is based on its execution, although most people do not know it.

Would Allah wish to save the life of Prophet Musa (a.s.), who was only a messenger to a certain nation and tribe, and yield the Imam of the Age (*Imam az-Zaman*) into the hands of Mu'tamid and Mu'tadid?

Would Allah protect the life of Musa (a.s.) while he was in the middle of the roaring waves of a river, and give no security to the Imam of the Age who was in the house of his father, Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.)?

Would the Sustaining Allah of the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham – a.s.) (Whose story is mentioned in the Qur'an) protect Ibrahim (a.s.) in the middle of the flaming fire, but allow the Last Pearl of the Prophet's progeny to be a victim of the lust and anger of the 'Abbasid caliphs?

Really, how do false thinkers and feebleminded people judge?

* * *

At dawn, on the middle day of Sha'ban in the year 255 A.H., Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) beheld the heavenly, shining face of his son who was to fulfil all Divine promises and glad tidings.

Not more than three days had passed after his birth when the Eleventh Imam took the holy child to his companions and told them:

"After me this will be your master of authority and my successor, and he is the Support, (*al-Qa'im*) for whose appearance all people will wait; when the earth is full of injustice and tyranny, he will fill it with peace and justice."

At the time of his son's birth, the Eleventh Imam told some of his companions:

"Oppressors were plotting to kill me so that my son would not be born, but now see how great is the power of the All-powerful."

Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) , ordered ten thousand pounds (10,000 lbs.) of bread and meat to be distributed among the Banu Hashim to mark the happy and auspicious birthday. 'Uthman ibn Sa'id was charged with this important work which he undertook in the best way.

From the very beginning; Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) hide his son from strangers.

Read carefully these words of Shaykh Mufid, part of which was quoted above.

"Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) prepared a true Government for his fruitful son. He kept secret the birth of his son and other related matters, because His Eminence was living in a difficult time when the caliphs were intensively searching for his son and were keeping a close eye on the affairs of Imam al-'Askari. This is because the Shi'ite Imamiyyah belief about the Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) had become so current that

they were waiting for His Eminence. Hence, Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) did not show his son, and, therefore, the enemies could not recognize Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) after the demise of His Eminence (father)."

Although the affairs of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) were unknown to his enemies and opponents, the sincere Shi'ites gathered the news of this important event.

Some of them were informed by Imam al-'Askari (a.s.) through a letter. One of the sincere Shi'ites, Ahmad ibn Is'haq, received a letter from the Imam written in his own handwriting, saying:

"A son is born to me. Therefore, keep secret the news of it from people and inform only his near relatives and particular friends."

Some of the Shi'ites used to pay private visits to Imam al-'Askari (a.s.) who would take them into the presence of the Twelfth Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) who would guide them. Abu 'Umari and Ahwazi reported:

"Abu Muhammad (Imam Hasan al-'Askari -a.s.) showed me his son (the Twelfth Imam) and told me, 'This is your Master (sahib).'"

Some other Shi'ites used to visit Imam al-'Askari (a.s.) in a group, and if the Imam trusted in them that they would faithfully keep their visit secret, he would show them his beloved son.

Mu'awiyah ibn Hakim, Muhammad ibn Ayyub and Muhammad ibn 'Uthman 'Umari have narrated that:

"We were forty persons who gathered at the house of Imam Hasan, then His Eminence showed us his son and said to us, 'This is your Imam and my successor. You should obey him after me and should not oppose him lest you perish.'"

Anyhow, from the time of the birth of the Twelfth "moon" till his Imamate, the Shi'ites used to go to the Eleventh Imam and congratulate him.

Hasan ibn Hasan al-'Alawi said:

"I went to see Imam Hasan (al-'Askari) in Samarra' and congratulated him on the birth of his son."

And 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas al-'Alawi also said:

"I visited Imam al-'Askari (a.s.) in Samarra' and congratulate him on the birth of his son."

Yes, in this manner was the Imam of the Age (*Imam az-Zaman*) born and kept hidden from the reach of strangers. On some occasions only were virtuous Shi'ites allowed to see him, until the year 260 A H., when the Eleventh Imam expired, and by Divine decree the office of Divine Leadership (Imamate) was vested in the Master of the Authority (*Sahibu 'lAmr*).

The Minor Occultation

When Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) died, the office of Divine Leadership (Imamate) was transferred to the Last Luminous Pearl of the Household of the Holy Prophet, Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) Although His Eminence did not appear amongst the people, some persons in whom he had trust and confidence were allowed to visit him and present him the problems and questions of the Shi'ites And they communicated to the people the guidance and commands of the Divine Luminous Light.

From the point of view faith, confidence and virtue, these were distinguished persons among the Muslims who were mediators between the Imam and the people And in due time they conveyed the guidance of His Eminence to the people.

By studying the degree of the character and perception of the belief and piety of these individuals, not only does the greatness of their personalities become clear to us, but we become more familiar with the Imam of the Age, because, among the sayings of these distinguished, trustworthy and reliable companions of the Holy Imams, one finds the signs of the greatness of His Eminence (Imam al-Mahdi – a.s.).

Among the companions of Imam az-Zaman, four became his most famous and confidential deputies who acted as mediators between the Imam and the people, and they are known as the *Nawwab al-arb'ah* (the four deputies).

In order to know more about the dignity and greatness of their positions, we give below a brief description of each one of them:

1) 'Uthman ibn Sa'id 'Umari: This honourable figure was not only a deputy (*na'ib*) of *Imam az-Zaman* but he was also a representative (*wakil*) of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) and Imam 'Ali an-Naqi (a.s.) He settled and organized many affairs of the Shi'ites The Tenth Imam (al-Hadi –a.s) said to his followers regarding him.

"This Abu 'Umari is a reliable and trustworthy person. Whatever he says to you he says so on my behalf, and whatever he does he does on my behalf."

This representation continued till 254 A H when Imam al-Hadi (a.s.) died. Then, the Eleventh Imam is reported to have praised the character of Abu 'Umari as having his high esteem in his address to his Shi'ites, saying:

"This Abu 'Umari is a reliable and trustworthy person. He had the confidence of the preceding Imam, and has also my confidence in my lifetime and after my death. Whatever he says to you he says so on my behalf, and whatever he does he does on my behalf."

Likewise, with this certificate of admiration, he became the deputy (*Na'ibu l-Imam*) of the Twelfth Imam after the demise of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.).

On the death of Abu 'Umari, the Lord of the Age (*Sahibu 'z-Zaman*) himself sent condolences to his son, Muhammad ibn 'Uthman saying:

"Verily, we belong to Allah and verily to Him shall we return We submit to His command and are pleased with His decree. Your father has lived in good fortune and has died with dignity. May Allah's mercy be upon him, he has joined his friends and masters. He was always endeavouring to search for whatever would bring him near to Allah and His friends. May Allah make strengthen his countenance."

2) Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Uthman: This man was the second special deputy of *Imam az-Zaman* He was also a deputy of the Eleventh Imam, about whom the latter said:

"The greatness of his dignity and the exaltation of his status among the Shi'ites is so famous that there is no need to explain or dispute it."

Regarding him and his father, 'Uthman ibn Sa'id, Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) said to one of his companions:

"Umar and his son are both trustworthy Whatever they do they do on my behalf, and whatever they say to you, they say so on my behalf Therefore, listen to their words and obey them, because both of them are reliable and trustworthy to us."

And *Imam az-Zaman* himself said about him:

"He is my confidant, and his letter is of the same status as mine."

3) Abu 'l-Qasim Husayn ibn Ruh Nawbakhti: Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Uthman, the third deputy of *Imam az-Zaman*, said about him:

This Husayn ibn Ruh ibn Abu Bahr Nawbakhti is my successor. He is a reliable and trust worthy envoy and deputy between you and the *Sahibu l-Amr* (the Master of the Authority). Therefore, in your affairs and important tasks refer to him and trust him. I was given this task; and I have announced it."

Shaykh Tusi (may Allah's mercy be upon him) said about him:

"Abu 'l-Qasim Husayn ibn Ruh was regarded by his friends and opponents as the most learned man among the people."

The integrity of Husayn ibn Ruh's deputyship was acknowledged by his opponents too. Shalmaghani, who was one of the pseudo-claimants to the deputyship, had to confess his falsity when *Imam az-Zaman* ordered Husayn ibn Ruh to expose him. He (Shalmaghani) said:

"It is not right between me and Allah to say anything in the affair of Husayn ibn Ruh other than the truth. Although his crime towards me is a big one, yet this man was appointed by *Imam az-Zaman* for the task. The Shi'ites should not turn away from him."

4) Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali ibn Muhammad Simmari: This honourable figure was the last special deputy (*Na'ibu l-khass*) of the Holy *Imam az-Zaman*. His death, coincided with the 15th of Sha'ban 329 A.H. Husayn ibn Ruh introduced him as the deputy of the Imam. The last letter of *Imam az-Zaman* (the Lord of the Age) to the four special deputies was addressed to this honourable man. In this order the Imam announced the death of 'Ali ibn Muhammad and the end of the deputation:

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful You are going to die in six days, may Allah grant patience to your brothers in faith on your departure So, be prepared, but appoint no one in your place, because from the day of your death the period of my major occultation (*ghaybatu l-kubra*) will begin.

Henceforth-, no one will see me, unless and until Allah makes me appear My reappearance will take place after a very long time when people will have grown tired of waiting and those who are weak in their faith will say: 'What! Is he still alive?' When men will become cruel and inconsiderate, and the world will be full of injustice and violence. Very soon some men will claim to have seen me. Beware! Anyone who makes such a claim before the coming out of Sufyani and the sound from heaven announcing my reappearance, is a liar and an imposter. There is no might nor strength except in Allah, the Magnificent."

As can be seen from this, it is the last order, in which the door of special deputation is closed by the death of Ali ibn Muhammad; hence, anyone who claims to be a mediator, or claims that the Imam can be seen, is a liar. In the period of the major occultation no - one has made the claim that he has been in the presence of the Holy *Imam az-Zaman*.

The people would not accept the deputation of the four special deputies unless they had been shown the miracles of the *Sahibu l-Amr* to verify their truthfulness and accuracy, although they acknowledged them as reliable and trustworthy and had not the smallest doubt in their piety, faith and knowledge.

The special deputies presented to *Imam az-Zaman* the problems and questions of the Shi'ite scholars, and he answered the ones that were necessary in letter form and delivered them through the same deputies.

In these letters, the most important and difficult problems on different subjects of Shi'ite beliefs were cleared up.

One of these problems was a question as to what would be the responsibility of the Shi'ites who would be faced with new events during the period of occultation, and what should they do to face them?

In the letter issued by Imam az-Zaman to the celebrated and distinguished Shi'ite Is'haq ibn Ya'qub he recounted duties, methods and guidance for the Shi'ites in the period of occultation. This direction was

carried out for many centuries, and it is one of the proofs of the comprehensiveness and eternity of Islamic rule.

In one of the letters to *Imam az-Zaman* which he sent through the second special deputy of the Imam, Is'haq ibn Ya'qub asked him some different questions, among which was a question which is the subject of our discussion. The Imam said that in those affairs one must refer to those who really understand their (Imams') sayings and have truly related them:

"But as for the problems which will occur in the future, you should refer to the narrators of our traditions for their verdicts as they are my proofs to you, and I am Allah's Proof (*Hujjatu 'llah*) to them."

Other letters of His Eminence Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) were issued during the minor occultation (*ghaybatu 's-sughra*), each one of them solved difficulties and gave instruction in the boundless sea of wisdom. All these letters were conveyed through the Holy Imam's special deputy to the desirous seekers.

Yes, the four deputies, who were at the highest level of faith and confidence for many years, were the blessed mediators between the Imam and the people till in the year 329 A. H., when this deputation was closed, and on the basis of the Divine Will the major occultation of *Imam az-Zaman* commenced. This was the very occultation which was prophesied a long time previously by the Holy Prophet and the Shi'ites Imams; and Muslims keep patient in this period of test, till by the order of Almighty Allah, the Awaited Imam will appear and the Divine Aim will reach its fulfilment.

The Major Occultation

After the year 329 A. H., when the major occultation commenced the special deputation of *Imam az-Zaman* terminated. If anybody claims during the major occultation to be a mediator and a deputy, then, according to the declaration of *Imam az-Zaman* himself, that claimer is a liar.

In the Holy Imams' traditions, the purpose of the Imam's going into occultation is compared to the sun being behind the clouds yet being a source of vitality and life for living creatures. Likewise, while the Imam is behind the curtain of occultation, he is still a source of the existence and remaining of the world.

During the major occultation, many people have had meetings with His Eminence (Imam al-Mahdi – a.s.), and have managed to meet him, but none of them have claimed to be able to see him or to represent him, because only the four special deputies (*Nawwab al-khass*) of the Imam had the honour of meeting with His Eminence whenever they wished.

Some of the names of these fortunate persons who have had the honour of meeting the Imam are mentioned in the authentic books. Among these personalities are – 'Allamah Hilli -- a famous scholar

and a rhetorician of the Islamic world; Muqaddas Ardibili – the most pious person and most knowledgeable jurist of his time; Sayyid ibn Tawus – a pious and a virtuous narrator, Sayyid Bahru 'l-'Ulum – a distinguished scholar. and other great and notable figures in Islam.

Yes, they saw the "sun" (Imam) with their own eyes, and their hearts were filled with the faith of *Imamu 'l-'Asr* (the Imam of the Period), and with sympathetic explanations they informed others about their meeting with His Eminence.

As an example, we can examine part of the will of Sayyid ibn Tawus which he wrote to his son in the year 650 A.H In his own words he explained to his son, implying the truth of the matter without claiming to have perceived him:

"O' my son! If success in discovering the truth and mysteries has been granted to you, then I will inform you regarding Imam al- Mahdi (a.s.) in such a way that you will never have any doubt, and you will not need intellectual proofs and recorded traditions; because His Eminence is certainly alive and exists, and as long as Merciful Allah does not allow him to plan events, he is excused from revealing and declaring his workings. And this matter is not exclusively to him, but was usual among many prophets and their successors. Then you must know with confidence and consider it as your faith and creed. And know that the insight of your father into His Eminence is brighter than his knowledge of the world."

The honour of seeing *Imam az-Zaman* was not exclusive to some special Shi'ite scholars only, but many devout and illiterate people have also had this honour. We are completely amazed when we see people who at one time used to commit sinful and indecent acts, but who after their repentance, and after having their hearts filled with love for *Imam az-Zaman*, also had an opportunity to meet him, and among them were also our Sunni brothers.

One of the Sunni brothers was Hasan 'Iraqi who lived a life of immorality when he was young. One day, he suddenly awoke from the slumber of heedlessness and asked himself, "Was I created to commit these evil deeds?" Then he left the immoral place he was in and went directly to the mosque.

By chance, a preacher there was speaking about Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.). 'Iraqi's fully disturbed soul turned into a heart flaming with enthusiastic love of the Imam Henceforth, he invoked Allah after every prayer to give him the opportunity to see the Living Imam (*Baqiyatu 'llah*) Finally, his prayers were answered and for seven days and nights he learned the path of salvation in His Eminence's presence.

Thereafter, this man became known as one of the great scholars of Islam 'Abdu 'l-Wahhab Sha'rani, one of the great Sunni scholars, and the original relater of this anecdote, used to call him by the title, "My great master Shaykh 'Iraqi."

During the major occultation, letters were issued by His Eminence to individuals and great scholars of Islam. In those letters new difficult problems were solved, and necessary guidance was given. Among these letters there was one issued in the year 410 A.H. praising a distinguished scholar of Islam,

Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Nu'man, alias Shaykh Mufid.

Shaykh Mufid has enjoyed a special rank for his knowledge and devoutness, and that letter was an acknowledgement of his efforts and worthy services. Even after the passing of many centuries, people still admire him with honour and respect.

The importance of this letter indicates the awareness of the Imam of the mistakes and immoral actions of some of the Shi'ites, and at the same time it gives hope in the purpose of his existence.

"We are well informed of all your affairs and none of them is hidden from us. We are aware of the problems which have occupied you from the time when you found pleasure and kept committing indecent deeds which your predecessors had avoided. We are aware from that time when your predecessors broke the covenant made with them, as if they knew not about it. We will not neglect or forget you lest calamity and troubles fall on you, and enemies have the opportunity to overpower you. Therefore, remember Allah and fear Him."

The valuable writings of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) during the major occultation are the most important guidance for his Shi'ites (followers). These writings can be referred to in the authentic Shi'ite books.

However, we are now passing through a very sensitive period in the major occultation.

In Islamic traditions, when the subject of the occultation of the Twelfth Imam is discussed, reference is made to the complex nature of this Divine test. In this Divine test, the sincere and faithful Shi'ites are distinguished from others "and becomes as pure as a pure gold."

In Islamic traditions, a comparison is drawn between the sincere faith of the Shi'ites and the faith of a few followers of the Prophet Nuh –Noah (a.s.), who remained faithful despite their very difficult test, and who, by boarding the ark with Prophet Nuh (a.s.), were saved from the Deluge.

Therefore, blessed are those who have passed this Divine test; we hope to be among their rank.

The Shi'ites During The Imam's Occultation

So now, what is a duty of a Shi'ite? What responsibilities does he have?

Truly, are we reckoned among the real followers of His Eminence (Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.)?)

If we study the lives of the devout Shi'ites (followers) of the Holy Imams before the Twelfth Imam, and consider their sacrifices without the slightest hesitation, we shall at once awake from our neglectful slumber and realize our weakness and guilt.

Were not Salman al-Farisi, Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, 'Ammar ibn Yasir and Malik al-Ashtar the followers of the contemporary Imam 'Ali, Amir al-mu'minin (a.s.), and are we too the followers of the Imam of our Age?

Was not Maytham at-Tammar, who did not cease to praise 'Ali, the Lord of the faithful, a follower of His Eminence 'Ali, and are we too, who are passing with the Imam of our Age through a strange period, the followers of His Eminence?

Were not the martyrs of Karbala', who with love strived in the way of defending the Imam of their time, Husayn (a.s.), and were martyred, the followers of His Eminence, and are we too, who refuse to give our wealth, lives and other means in the way of the Imam of our time, His Eminence's followers?

Is a person like Hisham ibn Hakam, who in his extraordinary and valuable debates crushed and defamed the opponents of the Divine Leadership (Imamate) in such a way that he was called the "assistant of the Imam" by Imam as-Sadiq (a.s.), a Shi'ite? And are we too, who are sluggish in fulfilling our foremost duty to recognize the Imam of our time, Shi'ites?

From what we read of the glad tidings in the Qur'an and the traditions of the Holy Prophet and the infallible Imams, the Imam of the Age (*Imam az-Zaman*) has special responsibilities which other Imams did not have. *Imam az-Zaman* will establish a Universal Government. He will fill the earth with righteousness and justice. He will exploit the earth's treasures and natural resources. He will improve and develop the land, and in this way people's awareness and understanding will improve.

Therefore, do not the followers of His Eminence have a very particular duty? Should not the Shi'ites endeavour to obtain the competence and merit of being His Eminence's special companions when he reappears by Divine Command?

Therefore, let us see what our duties are and how we should observe them. Undoubtedly, our first duty is to become acquainted with him.

Recognizing *Imam az-Zaman* is so important and essential that in the Holy Prophet's traditions we read:

"He who dies without recognizing the Imam of his age is like one who had died during the *jahiliyyah* (the pagan era before the advent of Islam)."

To die during the *jahiliyyah* means a death devoid of Islam and faith. And it is obvious that one who dies without recognizing the Imam of his age is counted in the group of the faithless.

In another tradition, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) is quoted as having said on the same subject :

"One who dies without having (accepted) the Imam, it is as if he died in the *jahiliyyah*, and people are not exempted from recognizing their Imam."

Therefore, we must endeavour to recognize His Eminence (*Imam az-Zaman*) for the sake of Islam and our faith, and so that we may be reckoned among those who have gained salvation and among the faithful.

Another duty of the Shi'ites during the major occultation, which the Holy Imam have alluded to, is the question of being ready for the Saviour. Hence, the first step for salvation is to recognize the Imam of the age; and the second step is to be prepared for the establishment of just Government by His Eminence.

One who is waiting (*mntazir*) and preparing himself for the appearance of the Imam must have the characters and merits of the companions of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.), and should sacrifice his life and wealth in his way. For this reason, Imam as-Sadiq (a.s.) said:

"One who waits for our commands is like a person who sacrifices his own blood in the way of Allah."

Yes, he who is really ready for the *Imamu l-'Asr* (the Imam of the Period) becomes like a martyr in the way of Allah.

In another tradition, the same Imam told some of his followers about the person who is really waiting for *the Imam az-Zaman*, saying:

"One who dies while expecting the Government of *al-Qa'im* is like one who is in the presence of *al-Qa'im* (Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.)."

After a pause he added:

"But he is like one who has been struck with a sword while accompanying him."

Then he insisted further by adding:

"Nay, by Allah! He is like one who has been martyred in the presence of the Messenger of Allah."

Are we reckoned among those who are expecting His Eminence? Are we at least waiting for the Divine Promise of the Authority of Allah (*Waliyyu l'lah*) in the same manner as we wait for the return of our loved ones from a journey?

In another tradition, Imam as-Sadiq (a.s.) narrated the virtues of the companions of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) saying:

"If one takes pleasure in being among the companions of *al-Qa'im*, then he must wait for him and must act with good behaviour and modestly. If he dies before the appearance of *al-Qa'im*, then he will be rewarded like one who has followed him. Then act diligently, and await, that this effort and awaiting will give you delight, O' you who have found salvation."

So, one who is awaiting and has not ceased from good and worthy deeds should earnestly endeavour to

be in an excellent and worthy position in such a way that Allah may shower His blessings on him.

So, we should pray to Allah that He may include us among those who are waiting for the Imam of the age, and that our acts and conduct may also symbolize the truth of our claim. Firstly, we should acquaint ourselves with His Eminence, the Imam, and then we should guide others, his opponents and enemies. We should gain the virtues of the companions of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.), and should always be in the expectation of his appearance Henceforth, we will be able to sacrifice our worthless souls and thus to make them worthy.

Shi'ites must have a devout link with His Eminence during the occultation.

Their hearts and souls should be filled with love and affection for him.

Their thoughts should be devoted to his service and their desire should be to meet him.

Their prayers should be to ask for the blessing of Allah to be showered on His Eminence, and their supplication should be for salvation.

Their existence should be one welded and fused unit, and their life should blaze with love for him.

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